



Rare Animals of Louisiana

Gopher Tortoise

Gopherus polyphemus

Federal Status: Threatened (July 7, 1987)

State Status: Threatened (December 20, 1989)

Rarity Rank: S1/G3



Identification:

- A large dark—brown to grayish-black terrestrial turtle with elephantine hind feet and shovel—like forefeet.
- The center of the carapace scutes and the entire plastron of hatchlings is a bright yellow—orange.
- Adult males have a prominent projection on the anterior portion of the plastron.
- The yellowish plastron is unhinged, and averages about 28 cm (11 in) in length in adults.
- No other Louisiana turtle depends on burrows to the extent that the gopher tortoise does.
- Burrows, which may be nearly 15 m (49.2 ft) long and 2 m (6.6 ft) below the ground surface, provide protection from winter cold and summer heat.
- The entrance to the burrow is a distinctive “half—moon” shape.

Habitat: Upland longleaf pine forest; mixed pine-hardwood forest; soils must be very sandy and well drained

Food Habits: Grass and small herbaceous plants make up most of the diet, although carrion, berries, fungi, etc. are also eaten.

Reproduction: An average of 6 eggs is buried in a shallow nest, often near the entrance to the female’s burrow.

Threats:

- Conversion of natural forests of longleaf pine to loblolly plantations, agriculture, and urban areas
- absence of fire, which creates a thick understory and midstory, thereby blocking the sunlight from reaching the ground layer and preventing the growth of grasses for gopher tortoises to eat
- illegal take of the tortoises for food or pets
- harassment by dogs
- mortality of eggs and hatchlings from imported fire ants.

Beneficial Management Practices:

- The thinning and burning of pine forests which will reduce the amount of understory and midstory. This allows more sunlight to reach the forest floor, promoting the growth of grasses for gopher tortoises to eat.



Rare Animals of Louisiana

- Roads with underpasses or similar structures that allow for tortoises and other wildlife to pass safely beneath, reducing road mortality.

U. S. Range: AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, SC

- Coastal Plain from South Carolina through Florida to southeastern Louisiana

Conservation Efforts:

- Gopher tortoises are known to have been picked up by Louisiana residents traveling in Florida and Georgia. These tortoises have been kept as pets but are often sent to Audubon Zoo in New Orleans when the newness of the pet has worn off. More than 30 of these gopher tortoises have subsequently been tagged and released at Sandy Hollow Wildlife Management Area in Tangipahoa Parish, well within their historic range, but isolated from the native population of tortoises.
- Owners of land with tortoises have been contracted to protect them as part of the Natural Areas Registry Program
- Research on the biology of the species has been conducted by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' Natural Heritage Program

